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ABSTRACT

The administrator in charge of assessment for the San Diego (California) schools discusses the district's decision about whether or not to endorse a national test. The San Diego schools serve 135,000 urban students in 165 schools, 31% of whom are Latino, 22% Asian Indochinese, 18% African American, and 29% White. Before San Diego would want to participate in a national test, the district's administrators would have to be convinced that the test would meet several criteria. First, they would need a clear understanding of the purpose of the national test, and it could not be simply another test to add to the existing program. The national test would have to be part of a cogent assessment plan that uses multiple assessments to measure student achievement. It would need to be standards-based, relying on a national consensus on what students should know and be able to do, and it would need to be linked to essential parts of the educational system. To be accepted, a national test would need to be "doable," so that the practical problems of testing are addressed. A final criterion is that the national test must recognize state and local content. San Diego is open to the national test proposal, but needs more information about its purpose. The stakeholders of the San Diego community hold district administrators to these criteria, and a national test must adhere to them also. (SLD)

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COMMENTARY ON NATIONAL TEST

Presentation by Ruben Carriedo
Assistant Superintendent

ED 420 724

I am the person in charge of assessment in San Diego, a large urban district serving 135,000 students in 165 schools -- 31 percent Latino, 29 percent White, 22 percent Asian Indochinese, 18 percent African American. More than 20 percent of our students come to school with a language other than English as their first language. My comments today reflect the response from an urban district to the national test proposal.

San Diego has not signed on for the national test. We are in the process of making a decision. My comments will address the criteria we are using to make the decision.

If Mike Smith approached me and made an offer for my district to participate voluntarily in a national test, the **offer** would have to be described in a way that convinced me it was a **deal I couldn't refuse**. The deal in my thinking, and that of my Board of Education and district, would have to meet four criteria. The criteria are related to purpose, standards based system, connectedness, and doability. Let me say what I mean by each of them.

Criterion 1: Purpose

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I would need to have a clear understanding of the **purpose of a national test**. Last year our district coordinated and/or administered more than **137,000** tests to more than **120,000 students** (Grades **2-12**) in 160 schools. The tests included **Abbreviated**

Standard Achievement test (ASAT), a norm reference test in mathematics and language arts (Grades 2-10); **Aprenda** in Spanish for the same grades; **PSAT, SAT, Advanced Placement** tests; **Golden State Examination in eight subjects** (Grades 8-12); **Physical Education** (Grades 5, 7 and 9); The **New Standards Reference Exam** (Grades 4, 8, and 10); **CEEB Achievement Tests**; and **NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress)**. These tests are in addition to teacher-developed tests. In some ways, the **last thing I need in my life is another test**. Our testing window dominates a good portion of our spring months each school year. The window is full, it's tight, and about to shatter. The national test would have to make my life better for it to get serious consideration.

And to make my life better, its purpose would need to fulfill at least some existing mandates and requirements, board expectations, and replace some of the existing tests. IT CANNOT BE ANOTHER TEST TO ADD TO THE EXISTING TESTING PROGRAM.

We, as a district, are investing heavily in other forms of assessment in addition to norm referenced, multiple choice tests (even if the new NRTs are described as standards based). We are strongly committed to standards-based portfolios and exhibitions as forms of assessment that should be used to document what students know and are able to do. This summer we scored 4,000 literacy portfolios in 3 clusters (high school, feeder middle, and elementary schools) and all middle level schools. Next summer we expect to score more than 25,000 portfolios at Grades 3,4, and 8 in all district schools. Right now we are fighting hard to keep this kind of thoughtful and performance-based assessment in our district assessment program. The national test and these new assessments are competing for nonexistent space/time in our fragile testing window.

So, to be more specific, I am reluctant to consider giving up the Abbreviated Stanford Achievement Test (our current NRT) or TerraNova (which we plan to administer next year) to be replaced or complemented by the national test unless I know that the national test can fulfill some Title 1 requirements, and have a chance of fulfilling some statewide testing requirements.

I would also need to have a clear understanding how the test results will be used--that the results can be articulated in relation to local and state standards. That is, what data will be reported to schools, districts, states, and the media; and what kind of comparisons will be made. I would also want to know what stakes, if any, the national test results would need to be attached to.

And while I do not expect the national test to fulfill all the multiple purposes embodied in existing tests, I DO EXPECT THE NATIONAL TEST TO BE PART OF A **COGENT ASSESSMENT PLAN** IN WHICH MULTIPLE ASSESSMENTS ARE UTILIZED TO MEASURE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT. It cannot be a one-day happening without connectedness to the current system.

Criterion 2: Standards-Based System

From my perspective, and certainly from the perspective of the district, there is great interest in any initiative or opportunity that will support us to become more of a standards-based system. Thus, we cannot disregard an offer to participate voluntarily in a test that is proposed to measure student progress toward standards, and for this reason we are giving the proposal serious consideration.

High standards to improve student achievement has become a mantra for districts and states. The single most important issue in our school community is improving student achievement, and improving it for all students. There is a great urgency to improve the performance of all but especially students of color who are performing at low levels. We have the closest alignment with the national test proposal on the issue of purpose - the improvement of student achievement so that they can reach high standards.

However, three cautions need to be articulated in this area. The first I will refer to as "Whose Standards?" and the recognition that:

Whose standards

- There are many sets of standards at the national, state, district and even school levels. Some are officially adopted, some are being developed, some address content, some address performance, and some address content and performance with examples of student work.

- Many of these sets of standards are different from each other; some focus on basic skills, some on higher order thinking and problem solving, some both; some are broad, general statements, some are very specific objectives and checklist-like.

- In short, there is more consensus on the need for high standards than consensus on the actual content and format of these standards.

The caution here for the national test proposal is embodied in a central question: **on which standards will the test be based**? We have to really question the notion that we have achieved national consensus on what students should know and be able to do. Our experience in California is that the consensus is still emerging.

A second caution is about the need to create a standards-based system with all the necessary components. In San Diego a standards-based system has several components beginning with:

- Content and performance standards in the academic subject areas that focus on student work.

- Standards-based curriculum and instruction.

- Standards-based professional development.

- Standards-based assessment.

- Standards-based accountability system that links all the components.

A national test, if it proposes to wear the label of standards-based assessment, must make the connections to these other essential parts of the system. IT CANNOT BE A ONE-TIME EVENT.

A third caution is that there are many assessments that already exist that describe themselves as standards friendly. Ask any of the developers, vendors, or program managers of these various assessments and tests about whether or not their instrument is based on high academic standards and can report results in terms of which students and schools have met standards in the various academic areas. They will all say yes. Among these tests, there are the New Standards Reference Exam, commercially developed tests like TerraNova, NAEP, and state assessments where they exist (places like Vermont, KY, Maryland). The point of caution is this: First why another test, second who gets to decide whether or not a test is truly standards based, third which one of the several is the best, and, finally does it really matter if it is one or several?

Criterion 3: Doability

At some point we have to get to the nuts and bolts of successfully introducing and administering a new test in our district--no matter how good the instrument and how worthy its purposes, we've got to get to routine things like:

- Ordering the materials.

- Training teachers and administrators about the new instrument, its purpose; in our district we take a new test very seriously. It took us nearly two years to select a new NRT this year. We involved teachers, curriculum specialists, administrators, parents, and the general public. We formed task forces to address issues like alignment to our curriculum, text books, and local, state, and federal mandates. We also have important

- discussions about second language and special education--how they are accommodated within the new assessment. On the issue of second language (LEP), let me say a few words. In California and San Diego we really believe all means all. We also believe that you have to address special populations, especially language, from the very beginning--when building something as important as a test that is supposed to assess everyone.

- Communicating to parents and the community about the new instrument, how it relates to current system of grades, report cards, graduation requirements, and any stakes attached to it.

- Scheduling the test in the master calendar.

- Receiving, storing, and disseminating the materials.

- Scoring and reporting results of the assessment.

All of these details require lead time, and the planning has to occur in a timely manner in a district as large as ours. As I noted previously, it has taken two years of planning to change from ASAT to TerraNova, for example. Local districts will need to plan for the national test if it is to have any chance of being administered successfully. Test calendars in most large school districts are planned at least a year in advance.

Criterion 4: Connectedness

The final criterion recognizes the local and state context. School districts, typically have local needs articulated by their boards which may include test requirements (in our case, integration--with test score comparisons between racially isolated and nonracially isolated schools). In addition, there are state mandates and related testing requirements. In California there is an absence of clear direction on how statewide assessment will be addressed- only that it is going to happen, at some time in the future with some type of instrument that, to date, is undetermined, and the test will be aligned to emerging but not adopted state standards. School districts are supposed to plan for all eventualities. And we are. A new test on the block cannot survive unless it addresses these district level and state context issues.

Our participation in the national test would have to, at the minimum, not conflict with and be coordinated with local and state needs. Right now there are so many unknowns that it is difficult to make the decision. We see this discussion today and a similar one several months ago in Washington as very positive outreach by proponents of the national test proposal to talk with districts and schools to resolve issues.

In summary, San Diego is open to the national test proposal, but we need more information about its purpose. We need to know whether or not it is a one-time event or whether it is part of a total standards-based system. We need to have these questions answered and begin the planning. And, finally, we need to know that participation in the national test will be consistent with and connected to local and state policy and context. These four criteria

are really the standards that I am held to by stakeholders in my school community, and they should be the same standards that a national test proposal should be held to.

RC:vjh

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